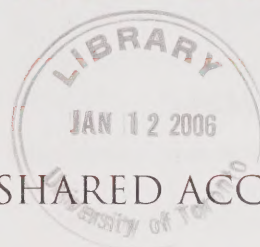


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ISSUES AND STRATEGIES FOR SHARED ACCOMMODATION

INTRODUCTION

The intent of this study was to answer the question: "Considering that sharing accommodation is a good economic strategy for single people, what strategies could facilitate this housing arrangement?" Other objectives were to identify

- barriers to shared housing
- strategies to successfully facilitate sharing in the private rental market in order to increase housing affordability
- practices used outside the supportive housing sector which could be adopted by supportive housing providers
- factors that are difficult to replicate in supportive housing

The research activities focused on single adults under the age of 65 (including students) who either share voluntarily as an affordability strategy in the private rental market or who, because of their special needs dependencies, are living in supportive housing. Emergency or transitional accommodation, homeowners with rooms or secondary suites to rent, generic rooming houses, intentional communities, or seniors' match-and-share programs were considered outside the scope of the research.

The study was initiated in October 2004 and completed in June 2005.

METHODOLOGY

The information for this study came from two major sources: (1) a literature review and (2) interviews with stakeholders including tenants who share in the private rental market, supportive housing residents, supportive housing managers and housing help agencies. The literature

review focused mainly on materials published in Canada and the United States since 1990; however, earlier material was considered if relevant. The findings of the literature review, including identified gaps, informed the development of the interview guides for tenants and other stakeholders.

The fieldwork for this study was conducted in Ottawa, Vancouver, Montréal and Gatineau. Sixty tenants and staff from 19 agencies were interviewed. A combination of face-to-face and telephone interviews was used to collect the information from each stakeholder group. The method used depended on respondent preference and feasibility.

FINDINGS

Is sharing a good housing option for single people? Based on the literature review and the interviews conducted with home sharers, it would appear that the answer is a cautious yes.

The sharing of accommodation tends to be a temporary situation averaging one to five years for most home sharers during periods of financial instability. Students and young employed people who were interviewed perceived sharing as a temporary situation, a cost saving vehicle, and a necessary part of a continuum of housing as they "moved up the ladder."

Advantages of shared accommodation

There are powerful incentives to share, especially for low-income earners, students, and single people in receipt of social assistance who cannot afford to live on their own. These included: financial benefits, security, companionship and independence (assistance which is needed because of illness or disability).

Similarly, supportive housing providers and residents cited assistance with living expenses, safety and reduced isolation, as the main benefits to those in shared supportive living arrangements.

Challenges of shared accommodation

Considerable interpersonal efforts are required to make shared accommodation arrangements work. According to the literature, a lack of interpersonal skills, personal dysfunctions and disruptive lifestyle choices that play out in common spaces are the most significant barriers to successful shared accommodation arrangements. Despite the potential benefits for low-income households of this approach, poverty can also increase obstacles to successful accommodation sharing. The poor have fewer financial resources to deal with emergencies and often have less stability in their life circumstances.

Regardless of the motivation to share, housemate conflict was noted as the major reason for seeking other accommodation.

Both the literature and the interviews revealed that conflicts often arise when it comes to the sharing of finances. Sharers in rented houses and apartments are jointly responsible for rent and utilities. Therefore, in order for shared accommodation to be a financial benefit for people, there must be a means to ensure that people meet their financial responsibilities.

According to the interviews, lack of privacy is a big issue among people who share accommodation in the private rental market as well as in the supportive housing sector. Almost all housing units continue to be designed for the traditional nuclear family or affluent empty-nesters. When conventional housing is used as shared accommodation, key informants and tenants cited insufficient space as the major design barrier to sufficient privacy.

Supportive housing

The literature and housing providers agreed that the sharing of accommodation is especially challenging for those living with mental illness or attempting to control addictive behaviour. The increased stress of coping with a shared living arrangement can lead to exacerbation of an existing mental illness, addiction relapse, new mental health problems, and an inability to focus on goals such as going to school or finding steady employment. An additional challenge may be coping with roommates chosen for you, which is the general practice, according to interviewed supportive housing providers.

Supportive housing providers spoke with a common voice about the need to limit the number of residents living together. In general, supportive housing providers

saw supported housing, where people live independently with portable supports, as the model for the future.

STRATEGIES THAT MAXIMIZE SUCCESS

What becomes apparent is the similarity of factors supporting successful housing outcomes for individuals living together in either market rent or supportive housing. Specifically they are:

- a clear understanding of individual expectations and capabilities is used during the matching process;
- sharers are able to assume responsibility for shared finances and household tasks;
- sharers have the ability to resolve conflict productively, or manage disruptive behaviour, with or without supports;
- layout of the proposed housing offers the right balance between private and common space.

Flexibility is the most cited characteristic of successful home sharers. The study identified three specific strategies that housing providers and home sharers can use to maximize their success.

1. Tools to Facilitate Matching

The study identified strategies and tools that could be applied more widely to support sharing arrangements. Although most are directed at seniors and those wishing to share homes they own, they are just as applicable to anyone living in shared housing. Existing resources could easily be revised and made available through agencies that deal regularly with low-income singles who look at sharing as an affordability measure.

There are many different kinds of shared rental arrangements and different sets of laws that apply to them. Community Legal Education Ontario (CLEO) has recently launched an interactive website, www.cleo.on.ca/roommates, as a tool to help people who share rental accommodation identify which laws apply to their situation and their related rights and responsibilities¹.

The market tenants who self-select for sharing could benefit from access to some of these useful tools. Many of them came to their workable, successful sharing arrangements through trial and error which, while useful for maturation, might be more easily achieved if they could start with some simple checklists and template agreements. This is clearly an area that deserves some attention as a means towards the goal of facilitating successful sharing for affordability.

¹ Also see CMHC's *Your Guide to Renting a Home* www.cmhc.ca

2. Conflict Resolution Intervention

It became clear from reading any practical advice on the interpersonal success factors of home sharing that the chief social skill required is conflict resolution. The ability to name issues, discuss them without becoming defensive, avoiding blame, being open to various solutions, and coming to an agreement on how to deal with problems is essential. People must have communication and negotiation skills to handle conflict resolution in a productive manner. In the case of supportive housing, the conflict resolution role is often played by a support staff worker rather than the tenants themselves.

Another service offered by both supportive housing providers and match-and-share agencies is conflict resolution when things go wrong. This is an invaluable intervention that can salvage sharing situations otherwise headed for failure. Skilled supportive housing staff regularly do third party mediation and conflict resolution on an informal basis as part of their work in helping vulnerable people achieve a positive residential environment. Match and share agencies sometimes, but not always, offer follow-up intervention to their clients to help them work out conflicts that are threatening the arrangement.

In the private market sector, a number of different approaches could work to either extend the “life” of a shared arrangement (i.e. conflict resolution services and tools) or make the arrangement more pleasant by improving the design of shared housing. Most promising among these solutions (and least costly) is the creation of “self-help” tools that could be made available to potential home sharers.

Self-help materials could be made available through housing help offices or from a website. Housing help agencies are well positioned to support those seeking shared accommodation. Where funding is available for staffing and implementing programming to match and support home sharers, such services are well used.

3. Design Features

The results of the field research confirm the findings of the literature review on the contribution of good design to the success of shared housing arrangements. The factors that facilitate success are

- provisions for privacy and quiet
- clear division of areas by function rather than open concept
- some choice and variety in common spaces
- separation of private and common spaces
- not too many people sharing a bathroom
- enough room in the kitchen to accommodate more than one or two people preparing food
- soundproofing
- durability of finishes
- a normal home-like appearance

In the case of supportive housing, smaller buildings are deemed more successful than larger ones when considering the quality of life of residents.

Good design can mitigate some of the minor lifestyle conflicts that can be expected to arise in any sharing situation, or poor design can exacerbate those minor annoyances so that they escalate into major problems. Good communication, respect and preventative rules can compensate for poor design. However, with unskilled sharers and lifestyle dysfunctions, poor design can lead to the breakdown of a shared housing arrangement.

CONCLUSION

Home sharing can be a viable affordable housing option for single people, particularly those on low income and those who may be at risk for homelessness. However, home sharing, whether it occurs in the private market rent sector or in the supportive housing sector, presents challenges to both the home sharers themselves and their housing providers.

A high level of interpersonal skills and processes for conflict resolution are key in both sectors.

The study identified strategies that housing providers and home sharers can use to maximize the likelihood of success

- tools to facilitate matching
- conflict resolution intervention
- design features

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Under Part IX of the *National Housing Act*, the Government of Canada provides funds to CMHC to conduct research into the social, economic and technical aspects of housing and related fields, and to undertake the publishing and distribution of the results of this research.

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